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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/I, PRM/ANE

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SUBJECT: DOUBTS ABOUT NUMBER OF IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA
UNDERScore NEED TO EMPHASIZE HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a move we are concerned will negatively affect USG efforts to gain support for Iraqi refugees in Syria, some European embassies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and other NGOs are quietly challenging SARG and UNHCR estimates of 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, with some putting the number as low as 300,000. Between these two extremes, the estimates range from 800-900,000 (Iraqi Embassy), to one million (SARG immigration authority), to 1.1 million (Syrian Arab Red Crescent.) We are also hearing unsubstantiated rumors from some European contacts about financial accountability problems in UNHCR and the SARC. UN High Commissioner Guterres' February 12-15 trip to Damascus offers an opportunity to highlight international humanitarian challenges here as well as to prompt UNHCR to be more responsive to donor concerns. EndSummary

Questions Raised about Numbers

¶2. (C) The Norwegians, Swiss, Canadians, ICRC, and others are challenging SARG and UNHCR estimates of 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, with the ICRC suggesting 300,000 as a more accurate number. ICRC and others point several factors to justify this estimate: a high 40 percent rate of no-shows for UNHCR interviews; the relatively small number of school-aged Iraqi children (some 45,000) attending school; and the gap between the 155,000 UNHCR-registered Iraqis and the 1.5 million estimate, despite UNHCR efforts to double the number of registrations in country. (Note: In past debates over Iraqi refugee population estimates, those arguing for larger numbers have pointed to unique conditions in Syria that encourage Iraqis to blend into urban communities and make it harder to conduct an accurate count.)

¶3. (C) Many are looking to a Danish-funded UNDP study commissioned last year to provide more reliable figures. According to the Danish Embassy, the report has produced

preliminary results that UNDP has shared only with the Syrian Government. The fact that UNDP has not shared its results with others, argue a growing number of critics, has fueled suspicion of inflated SARG estimates.

14. (C) Separately, the Danish Ambassador alerted us that the Danish Minister for Development, who he claimed had been active in promoting European support for Iraqi refugees here, was planning to visit Syria around February 21. The Danish Ambassador urged that this visit not be viewed as support for Syria's Lebanon policy or the regime's human rights policies. He argued that in the current atmosphere, the visit -- which would focus exclusively on the humanitarian refugee issue -- would positively serve the USG goal of increasing support for Iraqi refugees.

Concerns about Financial Accountability

15. (C) Along with suggestions that UNHCR and SARG refugee estimates may be inflated, credible sources are also suggesting that UNHCR and SARG accountability issues could represent cause for concern. According to a UNHCR source, Geneva headquarters conducted an audit of several UNHCR programs here in January. A Norwegian Embassy source complained that no one outside UNHCR had seen the results of this audit. This source also said a number of European consultants on detail to international organization offices in Syria were expressing alarm about faulty accounting procedures. These concerns involved UNHCR fiscal monitoring requirements and the possibility that SARG ministries may be re-directing assistance funds inappropriately. A related

concern is that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent is receiving UNHCR funding without proper financial accountability supervision.

UNHCR BEGINS TO RESPOND

15. (C) In response to what it calls "a whisper campaign," UNHCR convoked European diplomats and a number of NGOs February 6 to address these concerns and urge local embassies and NGOs to refrain from starting a "numbers crisis" without reliable data to back up their claims. Noting the increasing flows out of Syria into Iraq during November and December, UNHCR reps argued that the net inflows had begun to increase again in January. Tracking these flows remained only one piece of a very complicated population tracking puzzle, according to UNHCR.

16. (C) Privately, UNHCR contacts complain that European diplomats in particular are using the lower estimates "as an excuse" not to donate. They say UNHCR has no choice but to stick with the official SARG estimate of 1.5 million unless UNHCR want to risk having its operation shut down. UNHCR also points to the wide range of Iraqi refugee population estimates: 800-900,000 (Iraqi Embassy); 1 million (the Syrian immigration authority's new "secret" number, according to UNHCR); and 1.1 million (SARG estimate.) Given the significant disparity between these numbers and the ICRC estimate of 300,000, UNHCR contacts say they seriously doubt that the numbers could be so low. They nonetheless privately acknowledged to us that ICRC's claim creates new doubts and agree more authoritative data is necessary to establish a consensus number.

17. (C) Comment: Without more credible data, the Embassy cannot offer a reliable estimate on the number of Iraqis here. Our response to other embassies up to now has been to support UNHCR by stressing our shared interest in responding to the humanitarian challenge, made more immediate by the increasing difficulty of travel and the lack of financial resources of Iraqis here. While recognizing the significant operating constraints faced by UNHCR, we believe UNHCR and UNDP can and should do a better job of assessing the Iraqi

population to justify UN international appeals. We will continue to urge UNDP and UNHCR to communicate more openly and effectively with donor embassies and international NGOs. UNHCR Guterres' February 12-15 visit here offers a useful opportunity to highlight international humanitarian challenges in Syria and to prompt UNHCR to be more responsive to donor concerns.

CORBIN